

Truckload of concerns after lawmakers OK higher speed limit
By Ted Gregory and Rafael Guerrero, Chicago Tribune reporters
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Opponents fear more traffic deaths, lower fuel economy

[VIDEO] Truck driver Ronnie Barbour calls for raising the speed limit for trucks to 70 miles per hour.
(Anthony Souffle/Chicago Tribune)

Illinois drivers soon could roll along rural interstates at 70 mph after House lawmakers Wednesday approved a higher speed limit on nonurban highways despite safety concerns and a possible veto showdown with the governor.

Supporters said the higher speeds would place Illinois — home to some of the nation's busiest interstates — in line with neighboring states. Opponents contend the move would lead to more fatalities, especially in crashes between cars and trucks — and burn more fuel.

While the new speed limit would cover rural areas, the six-county Chicago region and two Illinois counties near St. Louis would be allowed to set lower speed limits under the bill. The state speed limit is 65 mph on rural highways and 55 in metropolitan areas.

Hurdles remain for the legislation, which is on its way to Gov. Pat Quinn. A Quinn spokeswoman said the administration had "some safety concerns." The Illinois Department of Transportation, Illinois State Police, Governors Highway Safety Association and Insurance Institute for Highway Safety also oppose the higher limit for similar reasons.

AAA Chicago, another opponent, took specific aim at increasing the speed for big trucks, noting that fatalities from crashes involving such vehicles have risen nearly 39 percent since truck speed limits were raised in 2010 and 2011 from 55 to 65 throughout much of the state.

State Sen. Jim Oberweis, R-Sugar Grove, the original sponsor of the bill, disputes those arguments, relying on a 2008 Purdue University study that showed no increase in the probability of fatalities or severe injuries when Indiana raised its speed limit to 70 mph on Interstate 65.

"We're lagging behind the rest of the country," Oberweis said Wednesday. "This would be one little, small step to move forward." The Senate approved the higher speed limits in April.

Near the center of the controversy are Mike Pyle and other nomads of interstate commerce, truck drivers. After polishing off a lunch of country-fried steak and mashed potatoes in the Country Pride Restaurant at a Hampshire, Ill., truck stop, Pyle, a second-generation trucker, considered the proposed higher speed limit.

"I'm sure there are a lot of guys who are going to argue with me," said Pyle, 60, who has been driving for more than four decades, logs more than 100,000 miles a year and owns an Iowa transportation company with 15 trucks. "To me, 65 is fast enough. That's all the faster I drive. Period."

His point is economic, he said. The faster trucks travel, the more fuel they use, and that additional 5 mph could cost him 15 cents to 20 cents a mile per truck, he said.

But when Pyle tried to impose the limit on his drivers by setting the truck engines at a 65 mph maximum, his truckers threatened to quit. "So I turned it back up to 70 to make them happy," he said.

Increasingly, legislators are raising speed limits to make their constituents happy. Thirty-five states have passenger vehicle speed limits of 70 mph or higher on some roads, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports. The number is slightly less for trucks. Texas allows cars and trucks to travel 85 mph on one highway.

That would be too fast for Ronnie Barbour, 59, of Upper Marlboro, Md., who occupied a booth at the Hampshire truck stop restaurant before heading to Belvidere, Ill., for a load of Jeeps. Barbour said he has been driving a truck for 34 years, and he supports the 70 mph limit, "to keep the flow" of traffic consistent.

"If you can handle it at 65 miles an hour, 5 more miles an hour isn't going to make a difference," he said, adding that he never runs faster than 70 mph.

Truckers Charles and Amanda Sandefur were killing time at the Hampshire truck stop before picking up a load of paper in Woodstock. The couple said they support a 70 mph speed limit on rural highways. Accompanied by an enthusiastic Chihuahua named "Little Man," the Sandefurs drive cross country as "hotshots," which deliver goods more quickly than standard over-the-road service.

"As far as safety is concerned, I don't think it would hurt anything," Amanda Sandefur said.

The biggest safety gain, she said, would be "to educate the people who drive cars" that trucks take much longer to stop and navigate the road in a much more cumbersome fashion than cars, vans and SUVs.

"I think that people would give us a little more room and maybe a little more respect if they understood what we were dealing with versus what they have. It would be a lot safer for everyone."

That difference in the maneuverability of large trucks compared with autos and the overall effect of higher speed are what concern many safety organizations.

AAA Chicago noted that federal highway data show that fatalities due to speed are rising in Illinois. In 2009, 325 traffic fatalities involved speed, AAA reported. That number jumped to 439 speed-related traffic fatalities in 2011.

IDOT pointed out that vehicle occupants are 26 percent more likely to be killed in crashes on rural interstate highways with higher speed limits than on interstate highways with lower speed limits.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration cites data showing that in 2011, 73 percent of the deaths in fatal crashes involving large trucks were occupants of another vehicle.

"You already have the inherent problem of the size and weight difference," Insurance Institute spokesman Russ Rader said. "When you increase vehicle speeds, you're just adding to the risks for people in passenger cars."

Considering the "safety disadvantage" of cars, Rader said, it makes sense to lower speeds for large trucks, not increase them.

Even the American Trucking Associations advocates for a national 65 mph truck speed limit. The group also petitioned the federal government to require the installation of devices that restrict truck engines to a maximum of 68 miles per hour.

But a supporter of the speed increase, Republican Rep. C.D. Davidsmeyer, of Jacksonville in central Illinois, said Chicago-area friends and relatives avoid driving through Illinois because the speed limit adds time to the trip.

Davidsmeyer said those bypasses are hurting Illinois businesses.

"People steer clear of our roads because it takes them longer to get through, which means we're not getting the gas revenue, we're not getting people stopping for food, we're not getting a number of other benefits," Davidsmeyer said.

House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie said that while some proponents call the measure "business-friendly," it is not a "people-friendly bill." She noted the significance of opposition from IDOT and the State Police.

"All the studies show that when you increase road speeds, you increase road crashes," the Chicago Democrat said. "And when you increase road speeds and road crashes, you also kill a lot more people."

If Quinn signs the bill, the speed limits would take effect Jan. 1. If he vetoes the measure, lawmakers may be able to override him.

The House voted 85-30 to approve the higher limit on Wednesday, and 71 lawmakers would be needed to overrule Quinn there. The Senate approved the measure 41-6, with 36 senators needed to override a veto.

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